

A Woman's Place

By Susan L. Ebert

I don't know whatever became of Private First Class Wilcox.

But many years past, his M-65 field jacket, BDUs and extreme cold-weather liners for both the trousers and jacket – appearing brand-new – hung neatly neglected in a South Austin Goodwill store, with PFC WILCOX printed painstakingly inside each one in crisp, indelible marker.

I do know he was a smallish man, for his uniform, to my delight, was a passable fit on my 5-foot, 4-inch 125-pound frame and I purchased the whole shebang – hooded field jacket with button-in liner, battle-dress shirt, trousers and separate quilted pants-liner – for less than fifty bucks. As I'd been invited on my first duck hunt, and didn't know whether or not I'd enjoy it, this seemed a reasonable investment in my comfort.

To be sure, the sleeves of the jacket and shirt were a bit longish and the pants' waist quite gappish, necessitating a belt to cinch them up. Like most women, my build cannot be confused with that of a teenaged boy: As the character Luther Willis extolled in South

Pacific's "Honey Bun," "Where she's narrow, she's narrow as an arrow and she's broad where a broad should be broooooaad . . ."

I've always wished PFC Wilcox well (I like to think he hit a growth spurt soon after enlisting and just needed a bigger size), as his cast-off uniform served me admirably during my first spectacular season of duck hunting. I took to waterfowling, well, like a duck to water; well enough to want better-fitting, authentic hunting camouflage.

Little did I know that this is where the real hunt would begin.

Shortly before the opening of the following year's duck season, and with a wad of hard-saved hundred-dollar bills, I drive two hours to one of the first big-box outdoor retailers to open in Texas, intent on a waterfowl gear shopping spree.

"Which way to the women's department?" I ask the fresh-faced clerk, who gestures to my target area.

To my chagrin, only a few lightweight garments hang forlornly on the racks. (OK, I did pick up a slinky silk teddy set in RealTree Hardwoods green).

Returning to the clerk, I explain I'm looking for waterfowling gear. "Try the boy's department,"

he suggests.

To my astonishment, four women have beat me to the young men's department, where they're slipping in and out of jackets –

with the sleeves extending past their fingertips –and holding up pants against their hips – with the long legs unfurled on the floor against their short frames.

A wisp of a young lady, sporting a dazzling engagement diamond, spouts a fountain of tears as she frantically seizes one garment after another. "My fiancé has invited me to his family's duck-hunting lodge, and it will be the first time I meet his father and brothers," she sniffles. "How can I make a good

Women on the hunt for camouflage, upland and safari garb in which to pursue their outdoor passions no longer need settle for cut-down menswear.

first impression, when I can't find anything that fits me?"

"Do you sew?" another suggests, proffering a tissue. "If not, you can take the garments to a seamstress to be altered. That's what I do."

I'm stunned. Somehow, it seems wrong, so wrong, to buy something brand-new and immediately pay to have it ripped apart and resewn. With only my silk camo 'jamas at checkout, I leave with my fistful of Franklins relatively intact.

The most recent (2006) U.S. Fish and Wildlife survey reports that 9 percent of America's hunters are women, up from about 2 percent in the 1960s. (Mind you; that's one in 50, up to nearly one in ten.) According to the study, 12.5 million hunters spent \$22.9 billion dollars that year, for an average per-capita expenditure of \$1,832. And according to our fathers, husbands and boyfriends, we ladies are adept at outspending the national average in pursuit of our passions.

Small wonder that entrepreneurial companies such as the ones mentioned here – often launched by avid women hunters themselves – are leading the charge to provide functional, well-fitting hunting apparel.

So here's a salute to you, PFC Wilcox, and wherever you are I hope you're doing well. (I feel a kinship with you somehow; after all, I did spend a year in your pants, and in them, discovered a newfound passion for waterfowling.)

Fortunately, well-fitting hunting clothes for the gentler sex are no

The author, who was introduced to hunting by her grandfather, killed this big Rio Grande gobbler in Texas.



longer the elusive quarry they once were. Those pesky ducks, on the other hand, remain a different skillet of fish.

WOMEN'S HUNTING APPAREL

Beau Hunter: “We’re all tired of wearing men’s clothes,” says Shannon McMullan, Houston-based founder of Beau Hunter, “and I found myself in a position to do something about it.” McMullan’s primary fabric is cotton twill with 3 percent Lycra, ideal for crouching, climbing and crawling through the woods. She has designed her own signature camouflage pattern, as well, which she describes as “very curvy and fluid; not as literal as a Mossy Oak or RealTree.” The camo comes in three basic palettes – sage, brown and charcoal – all with coordinating solids. Shop online at www.beauhunter.com.

Beretta: The venerable firearms manufacturer, as befits Italian men, continues its longtime love affair with the ladies. Nowhere is this more evident than in Dallas’ Highland Park Beretta Gallery where general manager Heather Asbury, a competition skeet, clay and traps shooter and passionate huntress, guides her female clients to gear that suits their needs.

Asbury, who has hunted in North and South America, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, knows what works in different situations and climates. The combination of her experience as a shooter and hunter, combined with her love of fashion, allows her to help female customers choose apparel that is practical and useful in the field while still being fashionable and feminine. The Beretta Collection ensconces enough effortless elegance to cause Ralph Lauren to change careers to become a bird-boy. Download the catalog at www.berettagallery.com.

Boyt Harness: Long revered by the traveling sportsmen set, Boyt Harness is renowned for high-quality gun cases and sportsmen’s

luggage as well as sublime specialty sportsmen's apparel tailored to upland, big game and safari hunters. A few years back, as a stalwart exhibitor at the Safari Club International Annual Hunters' Convention, Boyt Harness found that an exponentially increasing number of women were requesting apparel when visiting their booth.

With the same exacting attention to detail that exemplifies their line, Boyt assembled an in-house panel of avid women hunters and shooters to develop a line of thoughtfully conceived, rugged-yet-stylish safari and upland garments as well as a ladies' clay target shooting vest under their Bob Allen label. Fall 2008 marks the third year of their women's apparel collection. Shop online at www.boytharness.com or call 800-550-2698 to request a catalog or find a nearby dealer.

Cabela's: Thanks to avid huntress Mary Cabela, one of the company's founders and Dick Cabela's wife, Cabela's has led the way in women's hunting apparel, designing well-cut, utilitarian apparel and even launching a women's hunting catalog in 2001.

This year's lineup includes a vast assortment of the most popular camo patterns and high-tech fibers, in sizes S to 2XL. Ladies, forget that "Pillsbury Doughboy" feeling we get in a jacket cut for a man's broad shoulders: Cabela's Total Mobility Technology sleeves are cut for a woman's frame, allowing for fast, smooth gun-mounting. Visit www.cabelas.com to request a ladies' catalog or to shop online.

Filson: No longer need I covet my boyfriend's other long-term relationship – that with his decades-old Filson tin cloth field jacket – for I can now possess my own, exquisitely cut for a woman's frame. Filson, established in 1897, fired a few shots into the women's apparel arena in 1914 and again in the '70s that were basically sized-down versions of popular men's styles.

As of 2008, Filson has launched a

veritable volley of serious women's field apparel, with 42 pieces in their Fall 2008 collection and more than 50 garments planned for Spring 2009. Filson, whose motto "Might As Well Have the Best", guides their design process, has created an ongoing nationwide women's council of avid women wingshooters, big game hunters, flyfishers and sport shooters, to identify needs and field-test the line. Ladies, shop the collection in Filson catalogs, online at www.filson.com or call 866-860-8906 to find a retailer near you.

GameGuard: In 2002, when Texan Craig Smith got fed-up-to-here that conventional camouflage patterns didn't blend into his beloved landscapes of cactus, cedar and yucca, he launched GameGuard—designing a distinctive, realistic pattern that's as at-home in a Herb Booth painting as it is at a home on the range. Shortly thereafter, women at the ranches and shows Smith attended kept asking, "What about us?" Returning the friendly barrage, Smith retorted, "What do you want?"

Putting his two-decades-plus marketing expertise in corporate apparel to the test, he forged into ladies' hunting garb in 2004, now carried at a bevy of retailers in more than a dozen states. Perfectly practical, plus tailored to women's bodies, GameGuard's fashion-forward microfiber line now embraces sky-blue and khaki, as well as Smith's de rigueur fine-art South Texas camo pattern. Visit www.gameguard.net to find a retailer near you.

High Maintenance Camo: Although neither sisters Amanda Pippin and Angela Dial nor lifelong gal-pal Darbie Stahl grew up hunting, they all married hunters and soon found themselves happily afield. Not too long after, the Mount Dora, Florida-based trio determined to fill a decidedly overlooked market niche and are now marketing premium, well-cut ladies' camouflage hunting

apparel and sassy leisurewear at reasonable prices.

High Maintenance Camo's ladies apparel comes in sizes from 0/1 to 18, plus they've included a "Little Does" Field Gear line and "High Maintenance Babies" for hunters-and-huntresses-to-be. To shop online, go to their secure server at www.hmcamo.com.

Foxy Huntress: North Texas designer and hunter Shelah Zmigrosky debuted her Foxy Huntress line in January 2006.

After an African safari in ill-fitting clothes, Zmigrosky sketched out designs on her return flight, determined to create an elegant-yet-utilitarian line. Designed with a commanding sense of style, her women's hunting apparel follows function as well as form, such as the Velcro-fastened crotch in the camouflage pants, so when we ladies take an, ahem, "nature walk" away from the blind, we don't have to completely undress to answer nature's call.

Camouflage offerings are in Foxy Huntress' signature feather-base pattern. Available at retailers across the nation including Orvis stores in Dallas, Houston, Atlanta and New York; find a retailer near you or shop online at www.foxyhuntress.com.

Long Grass Outfitters: This San Antonio-based company focuses entirely on the safari market, says Melody Rutkowski, who along with husband Gerald, owns and manages the business. Long Grass began marketing women's apparel in 2002, which now is roughly 10 to 15 percent of their overall safari business.

Functional, stylish ladies' safari wear under the Long Grass label include a variety of shirts and blouses in both safari weight (5.8 oz. cotton twill) and tropical weight (4.5 oz. cotton), offered in olive and khaki. Long Grass also markets She Safari safari garb, as well as a sassy khaki rifle vest trimmed in faux leopard manufactured by Texas Safari Hunting Products. For more information or to shop online, visit www.long-grass.com.

SheSafari: Texan Pam Zaitz was looking for women's hunting apparel at the 2005 Houston Safari Club Show, and finding a dearth of choices, determined to launch She Safari shortly thereafter. "I've been hunting for 15 years, and my husband, who has a background in soft goods, is a lifelong hunter," says Zaitz. "I've determined to stay on the functional, utilitarian side, and the line has been tremendously well-received."

Zaitz offers well-conceived, stylish lines of safari, upland and camouflage garments – all thoughtfully tailored for a woman's body – in sizes XS to XXL. Pants are left unhemmed to accommodate a variety of lengths. She Safari can be found at more than 200 retailers coast to coast. Shop the easy-to-navigate Web site at www.shesafari.com or click on "The Pride of Dealers" to find a dealer near you. 